Forum Kritika: Philippine Literature in Spanish

AN INTRODUCTION

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About the Guest Editor
There are Many Reasons Not to Read Filipino Literature in Spanish.

None holds water. That it was written in the language of an empire that occupied the Philippines for centuries—yes. That it was produced and consumed primarily by an elite class of Filipinos largely uninvested in the broad democratization of Filipino society—yes. That the few people, literati and critics alike, who have invoked the tradition beyond the iconic work of José Rizal often have done so in order to wax nostalgic about the Spanish colonial heritage as an ideological foil to the subsequent American occupation—yes. All of this is true. Nevertheless, Filipino literature in Spanish may be among the most significant Asian traditions in any Western language.

Proving that the tradition exists is the first step taken of nearly all writings on it. It should not be the last, though such is the primary aim of much, perhaps most, relevant scholarship. Certainly, more than a century of propaganda of one kind or another has foregrounded the Spanish-language novels and poems of Rizal. The accumulation of acknowledgments of him as a foundational writer and martyr—he was executed, essentially for his novels, just before the United States wrested the islands from Spain and local revolutionaries in 1898—has been so effective that he is probably more central to prevailing senses of a national imaginary than any other figure in the hispanophone world. For all intents and purposes, however, the Philippines is no longer part of that world, which makes the ongoing elevation of Rizal particularly compelling for anyone interested in literary ironies: he is almost never read, anywhere, except in translation.

Moreover, his dominance of the Filipino literary panorama, his near-complete identification with the entirety of Filipino literature in Spanish, has left his predecessor Pedro Paterno and his abundant 20th century successors in whatever space is adjacent to oblivion. The poets, playwrights, novelists, short story writers, and others who produced an astonishing amount of work even through the apocalypse in the Philippines that was World War II are barely remembered, if at all. The initial efforts of simply gathering their surviving texts are scarcely underway. The creation of a 21st century audience for them is embryonic at best. Translations into English or Filipino vernaculars hardly exist. And why bother? Why turn to a tradition that is more or less dead, that seems to speak of concerns distant from us today?

There are national reasons, of course: this tradition did keep developing long after Rizal; it was indeed important among certain classes with certain powers; and therefore understandings of the Philippines in the first half of the 20th century are lacking without consideration of its Spanish-language writers. And then there are the larger humanistic reasons: all artistic traditions speak to our common humanity and we are lesser for ignoring any of them. But these two justifications, viable though they are, stop short of imagining the ways in which consideration of Filipino literature in Spanish might lead to new approaches to cultural questions around the world.
This potential is rooted in the reality that Filipino literature in Spanish challenges the structures of academic disciplines. Scholars of Spanish-speaking lands habitually specialize in either Spain or Latin America, while scholars of Asian cultures rarely work in Spanish. This holds true in the Philippines as well, where English dominates due to the regimes established by the United States after 1898. American Studies scholars, for their part, seem to be almost wholly unaware that Filipino literature in Spanish was produced under United States hegemony for half a century if not longer. Investigations into Filipino literature in Spanish, as a result, inherently call into question the cultural maps of various countries and of academic research itself. Its very marginality bestows upon it the potential to incite new insights in diverse fields.

Taking the tradition and the archipelago that contextualizes it as a center, rather than a periphery, rearranges more landscapes than the local. What literature in Spanish is and can be, what American literature is and can be, suddenly comes up for redefinition when Filipino literature in Spanish is interrogated. So too do supranational entities: Western Europe, Southeast Asia, North America and Latin America all begin to dissolve as discrete ideations the instant Filipino literature in Spanish is taken seriously. Paterno and Rizal wrote from Europe, in a European tongue, producing globalized novels that are commonly taken as fundamentally national texts despite being at every moment unconfined with the contours of the nation, or proto-nation, that is their putative concern. If Filipino literature in Spanish after Rizal is quarried and dusted off as an archaeological effort aimed at filling in a gap in a national literary history, that would seem to be a justifiable project. But surely a move to fill in a blank space on a map would provoke broader considerations if that move upturned the map altogether.

Among the principal aims of this forum is to offer a critical mass of studies that demonstrate that Filipino literature in Spanish beyond Rizal deserves further study and a readership rather larger than its present one, which approaches nonexistence. The effort here at presenting the state of the field is valuable for the investigations per se of the essayists and for the impulse their collective corpus might give to other scholars in general. These four articles dialogue with each other implicitly and in compelling ways. Surely anyone who reads them will realize that the potential of Filipino literature in Spanish to raise issues of great interest is tremendous. The sheer length and complexity of these essays stand as indications of how much exegesis can accompany the primary creative texts and how much more remains to be attempted. The poets of whom Isaac Donoso and Beatriz Álvarez Tardío write are, it is clear, two representatives of a much wider and largely unread poetic tradition. The fictionist of whom Rosario Cruz-Lucero writes is based in Europe and whose relationship to a provincial tradition in the Philippines is consequently, like the works of Paterno and Rizal, anything but provincial. And the dramatist of whom Eugenio Matibag writes would play critical roles in the developing interrelationship of intellectuals and state formation in the archipelago, a figure
significant therefore not only for his class in the Philippines but for similar strata all over the world.

The arguments that arise in studies of Filipino literature in Spanish can be counterintuitive. After all, the tradition is barely acknowledged to exist, so anything that anyone says about it retains the potential to alter worldviews. The periphery can be a powerful place. It can provoke reconsiderations of the broadest kinds. That is one of the hopes of this forum.

Of course, the periphery is central to those who inhabit it. It is not peripheral to them by a longshot. And acknowledging that centrality, listening to it, trying to learn from it, trying to inspire others to likewise try to learn from it, is for this endeavor the deepest hope of them all.